



CONSERVATION CORPS

Trail Steward Report

Croton Gorge Unique Area

May - Oct 2022



Department of
Environmental
Conservation



Introduction

The Trail Conference is taking a leadership role in coordinating stewardship efforts to keep up with growing threats to natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas. To educate users and help mitigate the negative impacts from increased use, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to begin a multi-phased approach at the Croton Gorge Unique Area. We believe the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. Our Trail Steward program is an integral part of our response to these threats. When used responsibly, trails protect both the people who use them and the environment that surrounds them. But without education, trail lands are subject to mistreatment and misuse. Trail Stewards provide outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Trail Stewards help discourage and mitigate the misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through education and public relations work.



Meet The Crew



Ryan McClean
Crew Member



Declan Urffer
Crew Member



Tiffany Rolle
Crew Leader



Andrew Katz
Crew Member



Charlene Ramos
Crew Member



Training

During the first month of the 2022 Conservation Corps season, five Trail Stewards received onsite training at Croton Gorge Unique Area from Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano and DEC Volunteer Steward Diane Alden. Additional training and guidance was provided by Tom Tarnowsky at the Croton Dam and the Keeper's House, Sara Kelsey at the Ossining Weir, Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Rangers.

Wilderness First Aid CPR / AED

From June 6-8, the Trail Stewards joined other Conservation Corps members in earning their Wilderness First Aid certifications, enabling them to treat and stabilize ill and injured persons in front-country and backcountry settings.

Leave No Trace Trainer Course

From June 21-22, the Trail Stewards came to Welch Education Center to earn their Leave No Trace Trainer certifications. The stewards learned the Seven Principles of Leave No Trace and how to best educate the public on outdoor ethics.



Croton Gorge Unique Area

Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:

37

TOTAL VISITORS COUNTED ON OLD
CROTON AQUEDUCT (OCA) TRAIL:

3,129

VISITORS TO THE RIVERSIDE
MAY 29 - JULY 1:

145

VISITORS TO THE RIVERSIDE
ON JULY 2-4 WEEKEND:

65

VISITORS TO THE RIVERSIDE
JULY 5 - SEPT 25:

25

BUSIEST DAY ON OCA:
July 30, 152 visitors

BUSIEST HOUR ON OCA:
11am - 12am
18 visitors on average

TOTAL BIKERS ON OCA:
997

GARBAGE BAGS HANDED OUT:
12

LOST HIKERS HELPED:
43

INJURED HIKERS HELPED:
0

AVG HIGH:
82°

AVG LOW:
64°

Launched in 2020 and operating on Saturdays, Sundays, and Monday holidays from Memorial Day weekend through mid-October, the Croton Gorge Unique Area Trail Steward Program has seen numerous changes and challenges over the past few years. In 2020, the Trail Stewards explained to potential visitors to the Unique Area that it was closed due to COVID-19 and the need for habitat restoration. In 2021, the Unique Area was reopened, and the stewards' goal was to encourage visitors to enjoy the area safely and responsibly. Those conversations had a significant focus on communicating Leave No Trace principles: being prepared for the steep and eroded trail to the riverside, packing out trash, warning of the potentially dangerous swimming conditions, and making sure that visitors understood the rules and regulations put in place by the land managers of the Unique Area as well as by the managers of the Old Croton Aqueduct (OCA) Trail, a New York State Park.

At the beginning of the 2022 season, the Trail Stewards had to deliver the unfortunate news to visitors looking to go down to the riverside that although the Unique Area was still open and allowing for public access, the informal trail leading down to the riverside was inaccessible because it traverses over private property. The stewards helped design signs in English and Spanish to convey this message to visitors. They had the awkward task of providing nuanced information to visitors, indicating that, although the Unique Area was not closed, they could not recommend any other alternative routes.

Croton Gorge Unique Area

Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



Instead, the stewards provided information on alternative parks within a reasonable distance where comparable recreation opportunities were available. For visitors determined to hike to the riverside, stewards provided information about the regulations and handed out garbage bags. Visitors were encouraged to spread the word about this less-than-ideal situation. Between the weekends of May 29th and July 1st, the stewards documented 145 visitors to the riverside. They did not accompany these visitors to the riverside since the steep trails were deemed unsafe for them to traverse.

On July 1st, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) officially closed the Unique Area since it was determined there was no safe way to access the riverside. This decision would help protect the safety of any potential visitors while a long-term strategy for a new, safer, and more sustainable trail design was being assessed. Signage was installed to alert visitors of this change. The Trail Stewards were stationed near the entrance to the area each weekend to greet and educate visitors about these new restrictions. Over the July 4th weekend, they documented 65 visitors to the riverside. Between the weekends of July 9th and September 25th, the number of visitors fell to 25.

Thus, during the time the area was closed, with extensive signage (including an electronic sign installed at the parking lot), education provided by the Trail Stewards, and enforcement provided by the County Police, most potential users were successfully discouraged from traveling down to the riverside.



Croton Gorge Unique Area

Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



However, a few visitors willing to disregard the posted rules did hike to the riverside, adding to the ongoing erosion and trash accumulation. Some of the trash left behind showed evidence of alcohol use, creating a potentially dangerous situation if those visitors had decided to swim.

Because the Trail Steward station was situated alongside the Old Croton Aqueduct, stewards also functioned as Aqueduct Ambassadors, providing hikers with directions and describing what sights they might discover along the trail. Early in the season, local historians generously offered training to the stewards so they would be well-versed and ready to share information and facts on the local history. These training sessions covered the Croton Dam, the Old Croton Aqueduct, the Ossining Weir, The Keeper's House Visitor and Education Center, and the various industries formerly operating at the riverside to take advantage of the available water power.



Aqueduct Trail Ambassadors



Visiting the Aqueduct Weir in Ossining

When visitors arrived hoping to visit the riverside, the Trail Stewards took time to engage in conversation, asking them what they hoped to do that day, and provided relevant information. In these personalized engagements, there was also the opportunity to discover why people came to this piece of land, what they liked about it, and what incentive they might have to keep it beautiful for future use. The stewards found that most visitors were receptive to the new restrictions and requests to respect the closure to keep the area safe for all to enjoy. Though the Unique Area is not an expansive state park or preserve like our other stewarding locations, the visitors' enthusiasm for the area illustrates the benefits of providing public access to natural lands.



A sign warning of some of the hazards



Andrew repairing the fence along the OCA



Diane Alden and the stewards identifying native and invasive plants along the OCA



Trail Maintenance



The Trail Stewards had many opportunities to make improvements along the Old Croton Aqueduct by performing trail maintenance. Our main focus this season was the removal of invasive species. This is especially beneficial because the trail can act as a highway for invasive species, given its size and significant length. By the same token however, the trail can act as a source for native species. By removing some of those invasive species so widespread that eradication or control is no longer seen as pragmatic, we create room for the spread of native species.



INVASIVE SPECIES REMOVAL

Over the course of the 2022 season, the Trail Stewards removed:

- 87.3 lbs of Japanese Stiltgrass
- 25 Honeysuckle Vine
- 18 Multiflora rose
- 6 Euonymous
- 14 Barberry
- 36 Bittersweet
- 31 Wineberry
- 53 Porcelain Berry
- 84 Nipplewort
- 49 Geranium
- 20 Tree of Heaven

We also spent a day with horticulturist and naturalist Mathew McDowell, targeting English Ivy, Burning Bush, Japanese Stiltgrass, and Low Smartweed.





Ryan holding a bittersweet vine he removed



Charlene pulling Japanese stiltgrass



This stone wall was uncovered and invasive plants were removed so that the native asters can flourish



CROTON GORGE CLEAN-UP

On September 1st, the Trail Stewards were granted access to traverse the old trail on private property so they could pick up any litter that may have accumulated over the summer. They joined DEC Forester Michael Callan and other DEC staff to remove trash along the riverbank.

Two bags of trash were removed and packed out. It appeared that the closure of the Unique Area kept the vast majority of the public from using the land for recreation purposes this season.





Ryan picking up trash along the riverside



A sign communicating the regulations



An example of some of the commonly found piles of trash left behind by visitors



Thank you!

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Trail Steward Program at Croton Gorge Unique Area is going strong and looking forward to another successful season in 2023. Thank you to our partners and volunteers for all of your support. We would not be able to do it without you.

Please feel free to email Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano (mromano@nynjtc.org) with any questions or comments on how we can continue to improve the program.